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Theological Education between the University and the Church:

Durham University and the Common Awards in Theology, Ministry and Mission

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Abstract

This article examines the new ‘Common Awards’ partnership between the Church of England and Durham University, and asks what the University and the Church have to gain from one another in the area of theological education. I argue that the University can help extend the range of critical conversations in which the Church engages, and help form some of the intellectual virtues required in those who pursue this reflection. In return, the Church can help the University recognise its nature as a school of intellectual virtue, its need for insistent and pervasive discussion of the good that it does in the world, and its need to resist the pressures that threaten to thin its life down to technocratic rationality. I also argue that, for both the church’s purposes and the university’s purposes, the learning pursued in this partnership needs to be understood as deeply engaged with the life and practice of the church – as taking off from attentive description of that practice, and as returning to the refinement, extension and transformation of that practice, however long might be the journeys of abstraction and reflection that take place in between.

Key Words

Common Awards, Church of England, conversation, intellectual virtue, common good

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David Heywood (in his paper in this issue) has highlighted the tension between a properly theological vision of education, rich enough to give direction and depth to Christian ministerial formation, and the thin, technocratic rhetoric and practice that too often dominates contemporary Higher Education. Yet the Church of England's new Common Awards scheme unavoidably involves negotiating this very tension, since it involves a partnership between the Church's theological educators and the University of Durham. In this paper, I ask what sense we can make of such a partnership – and, since I have now been appointed to act as the academic lead for the University's contribution to the partnership, that also means asking what sense I can make of my new role.

The partnership has its origins in a Church of England report produced in April 2011: *A Review of Models and Funding of Pre-Ordination Training in the Light of the Proposed Changes to HE Funding* – the so-called 'Phase 1 Sheffield Report'. That report proposed continuing with the existing Church of England practice of seeking Higher Education accreditation for its theological education, and listed the following amongst its reasons:

- Ministers are being trained to a publically recognised standard which gives them confidence to engage with broader society including other professional people.
- For ministerial students, university accreditation indicates the seriousness with which their studies are taken by the Church.
- Church approval of the curriculum offered is crucial but is balanced by HE accreditation. There is proper public accountability here and mutual criticism.

- The public facing side of theology keeps the Church in honest dialogue with the academy.¹

One of the pivots around which this justification turns is clearly the idea of public recognition or public accountability – an idea that is of course central to the whole idea of accreditation. It would not be hard to view this justification cynically. After all, external accreditation, or public recognition, inherently involves the church's theological education being measured not against the standards of excellence internal to its own practice, but against more general and therefore more abstract standards. In the current world of Higher Education Quality Assurance, that *could* be taken to mean assessment not of the depth, richness and propriety of the substance of the education provided, nor of the contribution it might make to the health of the church or to the public good, but simply of the formal consistency of the procedures employed and of their abstract compliance with national guidelines. It is a form of validation that checks whether, in the paperwork that describes a programme of study, stated learning outcomes are aligned with learning and teaching methods and with forms of assessment, and whether all of them are aligned with the very general statements in national benchmarks; it checks whether, in practice, the granting and grading of awards is consistent with these descriptions; and it checks whether all these descriptions and procedures are constantly being refined, in the light of user feedback.

There are, however, in the Church of England's list of the benefits it expects from HE validation, seeds of a more interesting, more substantive vision. The public recognition provided by validation is, the Report suggests, not simply a matter of abstract Quality

¹ Ministry Division, A Review of Models and Funding of Pre-Ordination Training in the light of the Proposed Changes to HE Funding [Phase 1 Sheffield Report] (2011), www.churchofengland.org/media/1280742/gs%201836.pdf, §3(c), p.9; accessed 29 July 2013.

Assurance systems, but of ‘mutual criticism’ and ‘honest dialogue’ between the university and the church.

These hints were taken up in Durham University’s bid for the Common Awards contract (for which I can claim no credit: it was written well before I was appointed). The bid speaks of

the value of a healthy relationship between training institutions and courses with a leading department of theology and religion. This relationship can enrich both ministerial training and the development of theology within the academy.²

It then goes on to set out the various benefits that a partnership between Durham and the church can provide. The proposed partnership has the capacity, it says,

to provide theological leadership in issues of curriculum development, to connect the partnership to the Department and to the national and international research networks in theology, [and] to stimulate research into areas of future theological research needed by the church in its mission...³

The bid describes this as a form of partnership that cannot be reduced to the formalities of Quality Assurance – it offers not simply validation, but ‘validation plus’.

Both the hints in the Sheffield Report and the promises in the Durham University bid document are, however, vague. In the remainder of this paper, I am going to ask what substance they might be given: what real benefits might accrue to the church from partnership with a Department of Theology and Religion in a self-avowedly secular university, and what real benefits might accrue to that university from partnership with

² Durham University, *An initial application to validate a suite of vocational ministerial HE awards* (2012), www.churchofengland.org/media/1532339/durham%20university%20bid%20for%20validating%20the%20common%20awards.pdf, p.2; accessed 29 July 2013

³ *An initial application*, pp.7–8.

theological education institutions committed to discipleship, ministry, and mission. I will focus on three broad headings: the sociality of learning, formation in intellectual virtue, and the pursuit of the common good, before finishing with some comments about the approach to theological education that might be fostered in the midst of a such a partnership between the university and the church.

The Sociality of Learning

At one point in Durham's bid document, the statement is made that 'Durham is a secular university'⁴. This is a self-description that does not, as far as I can tell, turn up very frequently in materials produced by the University, but I have found a few other examples: publicity materials and job advertisements for the Centre for Catholic Studies, the Catholic university chaplaincy page for St Cuthbert's church⁵, and a job advertisement for a position in St John's college, in the context of a description of its Anglican foundation and the continuing ecclesial involvements of the Principal. In other words, the description of Durham as 'secular' tends to turn up in contexts where engagement between the churches and the University is being given prominence. Given that entrance to the University was subject to Anglican tests until 1871, it is not hard to see that one of the points being made by such a self-description is that even though the University is working closely in various ways with the churches, participation in the University in general, and in its Department of Theology and Religion in particular, is no longer restricted, explicitly or

⁴ *An initial application*, p.4.

⁵ See the *Times Higher Education* report on the creation of the Centre for Catholic Studies, 13 March 2008: www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/durham-university-catholic-centre-graces-campus/401003.article (accessed 29 July 2013). The Catholic Chaplaincy page for St Cuthberts is at www.stcuthberts-durham.org.uk/chaplaincy.

implicitly, by religious affiliation. And if we understand it in this sense, I want to make the perhaps surprising suggestion that one of the benefits that a secular university can bring to a partnership with the Church of England is precisely its secularity. Let me explain.

Universities have always, unavoidably, been embroiled in the society that surrounds them. If one thinks of that society as a knowledge ecology, in which knowledge of many kinds circulates in many forms, shaping and shaped by multiple habitats, woven in with other aspects of human flourishing in endlessly complex ways, then universities provide one set of niches in the whole ecology – and, at least in our context, they seem to be niches with a distinctive character. Universities provide a niche within which it is possible to *stand back* from the present exchanges that animate our society's knowledge ecology, to ask questions that might otherwise not get asked and make connections that might otherwise not get made.

Of course, there is a whole spectrum of activity in universities, from forms of learning and research that take place right in the mix of the surrounding ecology and that might be expected to make a visible difference to it soon, to forms very much further back, connected to it only by long, twisting, and perhaps uncertain routes. All of them, however, involve steps back – various forms of abstraction, of questioning, of critique, analysis, review and reflection. The university is one of the few places in our society within which there is the space, the time, and the money to enable these steps back, for learning and research relatively free from immediate practical demands.

These steps back can give universities the appearance of uselessness – either through the sheer distance of the journey of abstraction that is pursued or because of the questioning they encourage of projects and purposes that are normally taken for granted. The university should not, however, be thought to be more fully itself the more completely it disentangles itself from the extra-mural world, with pure university learning understood

in *opposition* to the patterns of understanding that shape the grubby world of public affairs. Rather, universities properly cultivate a certain detachment from the immediate demands of practical life *for the sake of* the deeper resourcing, refinement and reshaping of that life.

One of the central ways in which a university allows students and staff to take steps back from immediate practical demands is by involving them in wider and deeper conversation – conversations that take longer, that push deeper into underlying issues, that explore more dimly-grasped possibilities of development, that draw in more unexpected conversation partners (including past generations) – than might otherwise be possible. Universities are, at their best, institutions *dedicated* to conversation – dedicated to the generation of descriptions and claims in forms that can and will be critiqued by others, to making and defending arguments designed to sway others, to confronting and trying to make sense of the views of others. Universities induct students into whole worlds of conversation, including conversations mediated by the printed word – and into the worlds of questioning and rethinking that such conversations generate.

The university, in this view, is an institution of learning that, as a result of a contingent history rather than out of any kind of necessity, has been distinctively arranged to allow its participants to take time with objects of knowledge – and to take time with them *together*. Any object of sustained attention within a university gathers a community around it, and (at its best) that community is marked by a strong ethos of responsibility: a responsibility of each participant to the others for the cogency, the accuracy, the generativity of what he or she says about this object. Objects of knowledge in the university appear as sources and centres of a certain kind of attentive and responsible ongoing social engagement; and even when the rhetoric of settled results and finished discoveries prevails, university practice typically belies that rhetoric. Knowledge, in the university, is found in the continual development of this social engagement.

One of the benefits that partnership with a Department of Theology and Religion in a secular university might be able to bring to the church is therefore involvement in such a network of restless, persistent, insistent conversation – a network that, precisely because the university is ‘secular’ in the sense that I have suggested, stretches well beyond the borders of the church. It is not that the university is the only context in which such extramural conversation is possible for the church, nor that the university enables forms of conversational questioning that would not in principle be possible in theological education institutions in their own right, nor that these are the only forms of extramural conversation in which the church is and should be involved. In practice, however, universities are resourced for and habituated to certain patterns of intense conversation that tend not to be readily possible elsewhere. What the secular university can offer the church is, in principle, the possibility that the church’s present claims and practices and patterns of understanding can be explored and investigated and questioned by means of these intense conversations.

One of the benefits that the church can offer back to the university, however, is precisely the naming and the valuing of the very sociality of knowledge that the university, at its best, displays. To summarise a case that I have made more fully elsewhere: from a Christian theological perspective, knowledge appears as an unending social process rather than as a finished individual product. In the first place, the knowledge of God is the central form of our knowing, and in that knowing there is always further to go, always more depth to be plumbed (or, as in C.S. Lewis’s vision in *The Last Battle*, always the possibility of travelling ‘further up and further in’). The best creaturely image of the creator, the best finite image of the infinite, is unending growth. This structure is also reflected, however, in our knowledge of God’s creatures: they, too, are sources of ongoing knowing as we go on learning how to live lovingly with them – how to live with them as

fellow creatures, before God. In the second place, such learning takes place as we go on learning how to live with our fellow creatures *together*. In this theological perspective, knowledge is not an individual possession; we know by learning from one another and responding to one another. The smallest unit that can be said to know is ‘two or three gathered together’ – two or three people who see differently and who learn from one another’s differences. The fundamental theological picture of knowing is not (or should not be) that of a static mind standing over against a static object, having comprehended it, but of a community gathered around an object, going on learning from each other how to live well with that object. One member of that community discovers a possible way of living with or responding to that object, and offers it to rest of community to be tested, explored, improvised upon, and returned enriched. The paradigm of knowledge here is the interaction of prophecy and discernment in the Body of Christ – an exchange of gifts in which one grows richer precisely by giving away, and in which to know more deeply is a matter of becoming more deeply a giver, and more deeply a receiver.

A university is not, of course, the church; it is not the Body of Christ; it is not gathered primarily in worship, discipleship and mission. To the extent that it is truly concerned with knowledge, however, it will need (when seen with Christian theological eyes) to take something of this form – the form of a community of gift and reception that in its structure *echoes*, if no more, the structure of the Body of Christ. If the university can give the church the gift of more extended conversation, the church can call the university to be more deeply, more thoroughly conversational – to recognise more fully that it is not, and cannot be if it is serious about knowing, the producer of a static product, but always and fundamentally engaged in generating and sustaining a certain kind of conversational community, within and beyond its walls. The conversation between Durham University and the Church of England that is generated by the Common Awards partnership needs to

be one in which the ineradicable sociality of the learning that we seek to foster is kept firmly in view – and in which this sociality is promoted rather than ignored or repressed in our reviews of curricula, of learning and teaching methods, and of modes of assessment.

Formation in Intellectual Virtue

Given that the University was governed directly by the Dean and Chapter of the cathedral until 1907, Durham's self-descriptions as 'secular' also suggest another element: that it is free from ecclesiastical *control*. At least in principle, its staff and students are committed to following the evidence and argument pertinent to their disciplines wherever they may lead, and to refusing any premature closing down of their investigations – and it is easy (not without some justification) to picture this as a freedom from the kind of religious oversight to which the University used to be subject.⁶ To picture it, however, simply as a negative freedom, a freedom *from* restriction, is inadequate. It needs also to be understood as freedom *for* something – freedom for the unrestricted pursuit of particular kinds of discipline.

Universities are contexts for the committed pursuit of various kinds of discipline – where 'discipline' here is meant both in the sense of 'academic discipline', and in the sense of 'character-forming discipline', and even 'spiritual discipline'. Universities are, at their best, schools of intellectual virtue. By means of an apprenticeship in an intellectual

⁶ The story of the relation between academic freedom and religion is, of course, more complicated than this. See Stephen R. Holmes, 'Awesome Hospitality: On the Absurd Idea of a Baptist University' in Stephen R. Todd (ed.), *The Baptist University* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming) and my discussion of his work in *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp.121–123. It is not insignificant that Holmes writes from a Baptist rather than an Anglican perspective – from a tradition formed in part over against establishment, and in the context of restriction and persecution by established church.

discipline, they seek to form their students in various kinds of attentiveness, of patience, of intellectual humility, and of seasoned judgment. They are unavoidably, and quite properly, involved in the process of character formation, even if they only focus on limited aspects of that process.

Lynn Holt, in his book *Apprehension*, gives a persuasive account of the ideal aimed at in the kind of intellectual formation pursued in the university.

The ideal knower is one who brings a rich supply of experience and habits of insight, a rich stock of universals and the vocabulary with which to express them, and an ability to deploy this stock in both familiar and novel situations. His experience is formed within the disciplines of practice, but he is able to extend those disciplines in ways which have the potential to transform the practice.⁷

The ideal is a mind formed by ‘experience, training, and habituation’⁸ – by discipline – to see particular kinds of distinction and connection.

Academic disciplines are, or should be, communities of such intellectual experience, training and habituation – communities of inquiry in which such fine-grained apprehension is formed. Within them students are habituated to the pursuit of the questions appropriate to a certain kind of object; they are, ideally, formed until the pursuit of such questions becomes second nature – until the world is habitually seen by the student through eyes that have been re-shaped by this discipline. They are communities of training in virtuous perception, and in the judgment that springs from it. One could think of an academic discipline, insofar as it is a training in virtuous apprehension, as taking sandpaper to some particular area of one’s skin – rubbing it raw, until it is unusually, even

⁷ Lynn Holt, *Apprehension: Reason in the Absence of Rules* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 70. I have discussed Holt in *A Theology of Higher Education*, pp.177–181.

⁸ *Apprehension*, 65.

painfully sensitive. A discipline *sensitizes*, enabling one to see more in some particular area than is normal: to make finer distinctions, to see things in a finer web of connections, to ask deeper questions.

One of the benefits that partnership with the university might bring to the church, then, is the opportunity for deeper formation in certain patterns of intellectual virtue – in the disciplined sensitization that academic training can produce. Once again, though, it is not that the university is the only context in which such formation in intellectual virtue is possible for the church, nor that the university enables kinds of formation that are not possible in theological education institutions in their own right, nor that kinds of virtuous formation on offer in the university are the only kinds in which the church is and should be involved. It may nevertheless be the case as a matter of contingent fact, in our present context, that universities do provide a context for elements of intellectual formation, for the sharpening of certain habits of attention and critique that are not so easily formed elsewhere.

Here too, however, one of the benefits that the church can offer back to the university is precisely the naming of the university as a school of intellectual virtue, and a challenge to think through the implications of that naming more deeply. Though the language of virtue is certainly available, even reasonably widespread in discussions of university education, it is by no means the dominant language, and is still regularly swamped by language that suggests that education involves the acquisition and possession of discrete skills and bodies of information, rather than the deep on-going formation of judgment. And even where the language of virtue and character is used to describe university education, it is often taken in a direction that a Christian theological account will refuse. If we return to Holt, for instance, we find him (quite rightly) saying that the standard of excellence for an intellectual community will not be some ‘neutral, impersonal standards of

theoretical correctness' because 'the standards of judgment are personal' (13); the standard of excellence for communities of inquiry is the virtuous apprehender. And Holt is also right to stress that the virtues he is thinking of are not possessed by everyone, because they are acquired only by those with aptitude, and only after serious training (14). Holt's image of excellent knowing, however, is of an intellectual virtuoso, rather like

the Renaissance magister, possessed of . . . an understanding of the world which is both rooted in his culture yet is more subtle and sophisticated than his peers. (57)

Yet from a Christian theological point of view, the image of the virtuoso is a dubious one. From a Christian perspective, the truly virtuous knower is not a virtuoso but a *saint*: someone who is formed to be deeply open to receiving from others the gift of their apprehension, as well as making his or her apprehensions available as a gift to the whole body. Virtue here is less of an individual matter, and more the lifeblood of a learning community – and if individual members of that community are formed in particular kinds of sensitivity that mark them out from their peers, that only ultimately makes sense as their gift to a whole Body that, by means of the different formations and sensitivities of its members, together knows well.

Serious engagement with the church and with theological education therefore has the capacity to challenge the university to examine the ways in which it is still beholden to a picture of learning as a matter of individual attainment or possession – a picture that undermines its ability to pursue its own mission. The university and the church's theological education institutions will need to work together, for instance, to think about practices of assessment, and the ways in which they can reinforce such a picture, and so fail to do justice to the deep nature of intellectual formation and academic discipline. It might also be the case – though perhaps this is too much to hope! – that partnership with the church can help the university identify and fight against the pressure, reinforced by the

Research Excellence Framework, to think of research as an accumulating pile of poker chips in front of each academic, and of their interactions as a quasi-economic competition. The university might be able to help form in the church various intellectual virtues, various forms of intellectual discipline, that are appropriate to the kinds of knowing involved in the life of the church. The church in turn, however, can help the university sustain a deeper, more appropriate vision of the kind of intellectual excellence that it pursues – and so help the university defend itself against creeping instrumentalization.

The Pursuit of the Common Good

It will be clear already that I am confident that the university has a good deal to offer to the church, by way of extending its conversations and deepening aspects of its intellectual formation – even if it is also clear that the church has a good deal to offer to the university by way of a challenge to recognise, protect and deepen the good that it does. The picture is less positive, however, when I turn, rather more briefly, to my third heading.

If Durham's self-description as a 'secular university' might suggest both a desire to include staff and students with multiple religious and non-religious affiliations, and a desire to assert its freedom from forms of ecclesiastical control that might have curtailed its pursuit of academic discipline, it might also signal a desire to serve a society that is a patchwork of multiple faiths and forms of secularity – to contribute to the common good of a very diverse world.

I would like to be able to say that universities are niches in our society's knowledge ecology within which serious questions about the common good, about human flourishing, are raised, insistently and pervasively. I would like to be able to claim that universities can be a space for a restless, inclusive, multi-disciplinary, on-going argument about the

common good, and about the relation to the common good of all that we teach and research. I would like to be able to claim that such arguments regularly interrupt our rush to efficiency or effectiveness – that such arguments crop up regularly in our Quality Assurance procedures and in our strategy meetings and in our curriculum reviews, and that they have been central in our discussions of research Impact. I must admit, however, that although it is by no means completely absent, the evidence for such claims is much patchier than I would like.

There should be such questioning and debate, and there could be – it is proper to the university's purpose, and congruent with the university's best practice – but universities are not much better than the surrounding society at serious discussion of our varying visions for human flourishing, and their interaction. The church can therefore play an important role in helping to push universities in the direction of this possibility, whether through the question-pushing activity of chaplains⁹ or simply through the contribution of Christian staff and students, working alongside any others who are willing to press these questions. The church can play a role in insisting that, however abstract, however distant from immediate practical concerns the learning that takes place in universities might be, that learning only finally has value to the extent that it makes for the enriching, the deepening, the improving, the repairing, the extending, the refinement of the life that surrounds the university. The university needs reminding that it is inextricably embroiled in the society that surrounds it, and that it exists for the good of that society – and that

⁹ After all, in the words of James Walters, chaplain at the London School of Economics (in a conversation on Facebook!), chaplaincy is fundamentally about the deeper humanising of institutions that, in order to live up to the best possibilities of their stated purpose – health, or education, say – should themselves be deeply humanising, but which have lost the ability to keep that in view.

insistent pursuit of the question of how that good is to be understood and pursued is therefore absolutely fundamental to its existence.

The university exists to generate intellectual sociality: to induct people into wider communities of mutual questioning and response than they might otherwise have access to. It exists to form people in particular intellectual disciplines, habituating them to the disciplined pursuit of the questions appropriate to some aspect of the world that confronts them. But it also exists to pursue these forms of questioning against a particular horizon, the horizon of the common good, and neither its sociality nor its virtue make much sense unless they are oriented in this direction.

In Durham, I hope that the new partnership with the Church of England might provide one extra impetus in this direction – precisely by its oddity. In a university that understands itself as secular, set in a broader intellectual culture that is more often than not suspicious of religious commitment, a partnership with a church – and with the very church that used to restrict access to this university – is bound to raise critical questions. Is such a partnership *really* congruent with the university's nature and purpose? My hope is that precisely the inevitability of this question will provide an occasion for confident articulation of a response – and that, if handled wisely, the response can help remind the university of its deepest responsibilities.

Theological Education between the University and the Church

The case for accepting a partnership like that between Durham and the Church of England does not, to my mind, begin by asking whether God exists, or whether faith is a reasonable basis for inquiry. It begins, much more simply, by asking whether the *church* exists, and whether the church makes a difference to our society. Thankfully, it turns out,

without too much attendant controversy, that the church does indeed exist, and that it does indeed make a difference. It also turns out that the difference that the church makes is in part shaped by its internal patterns of education and discussion, including the church's internal patterns of education and discussion about what it believes, and about the sources and implications of those beliefs. Furthermore, those patterns of discussion have a certain rough coherence and structure to them: they are discourses within which people can and do make arguments, and those arguments can and do make a difference.

If the university is to be embroiled in the surrounding society, taking account of the knowledge ecology within which it sits, examining the discourses that shape its world, then *of course* it has to be engaged with these Christian discourses. It would be a serious dereliction of duty – a failure to be serious *as* a university – were the university to refuse this engagement. That means the university *of course* has to be involved in exploring and understanding the church's discourses, understanding the arguments and claims that belong to them, understanding what kinds of question might be posed to them, and to what kinds of critique they might be exposed. It also means that the university *of course* will be especially interested (if it is genuinely interested in forms of investigation that have the capacity to make a difference) in the kinds of question and critique that will be audible or meaningful to the people who actually inhabit and propagate these Christian discourses – questions and critiques that make sense in terms of the criteria that members of the church explicitly and implicitly acknowledge. It also means that the university will *of course* be interested in exploring the kinds of new argument or constructive development that might be possible within these Christian discourses, and the kinds of contribution that might be possible from within these discourses to the wider arguments of public life. And, finally, it means that the university will *of course* be interested in discovering what kinds of contribution to the university's own debates about its own nature and purpose might be

possible from within these Christian discourses, and in finding out whether those contributions can be acknowledged and can make any difference to those debates even when they are pursued by many who do not share the assumptions upon which the Christian contributions will be built. Why ever would the university *not* be interested in these things?

All of this should be able to make sense as an appropriate part of the university's mission even to those who believe that these Christian discourses rest on deeply mistaken assumptions. One simply need to believe that it is a good thing when the claims and arguments that shape our society are opened up as seriously as possible to the kinds of investigation, exploration, questioning and critique – the kinds of critical conversation and academic discipline – that are appropriate to them.

It is worth asking, however, whether this account of the propriety of the Common Awards partnership (the only justification that really works, I think, for a secular university) is compatible with the kind of account of theological education that might emerge from the churches – worth asking, because the answer seems to me to be that there is a very deep congruence between these accounts. After all, the justification that I have just been offering assumes that the stepping-off point for the theological education pursued in this partnership will have to be deep and careful attention to the actual life of the church in the midst of the world – and that its purpose must be, at least in part, to return to that life in the light of the patterns of disciplined questioning and conversation that have been pursued, in order to inform and reshape it. That does not mean that the journey of reflection on this life can't involve considerable journeys of abstraction and of critical distancing, but it does mean that those journeys will ultimately always take off from practice, and be undertaken for the sake of a return to practice. Theological study is fundamentally a critical moment within Christian practice in the world.

My own research work tries to take this seriously in relation especially to the study of doctrine.¹⁰ In line with various currents in the academic study of doctrine over the past few decades, I try to understand doctrinal discourse as a form of the church's self-discipline – as one of the ways in which the church has taken account of its own practice, and sought to direct and protect it. Doctrinal discourse fundamentally belongs within the cycle of the church's reflection on its own practice – not unlike the reflective cycle described by David Heywood. To understand doctrine is to understand it in relation to the life of the church in the world (and to understand the life of the church in the world in relation to doctrine), and any exploration of doctrine that loses or ignores that connection misunderstands the nature of its object. To say this is not, however, to protest against an academic construal of doctrinal study for the sake of an ecclesial construal. The justification for the partnership between Durham and the Church of England that I sketched above implies, rather, that theological education becomes *less* academic, *less* justifiable as a part of a secular university, *less* intellectually respectable and publicly accountable, the less it is in touch with the life of the church – and that is as true whether one looks at it from the Higher Education or the ecclesial side of the partnership.

Making the case for this partnership is therefore at one and the same time a way of making the case for theological study that is deeply and inextricably situated in relation to the life and practice of the church, and a way of making the broader case that the university is not an independent producer of knowledge in the abstract, but that it inevitably and properly operates *in the midst* of the world. The university properly sits in the midst of the surrounding society's knowledge ecology, and at its best it works on what

¹⁰ See, for instance, 'Scriptural Reasoning and the Discipline of Christian Doctrine' in *Modern Theology* 29.4 (October 2013), forthcoming.

it finds there to sift, understand, develop, critique, extend and refine – and its purpose cannot be understood apart from the good that it does by means of that embroilment.

Conclusion

The Common Awards scheme is, primarily, an activity of the Church. The Awards have been designed by the Church of England's Ministry Division, in consultation with the church's own theological education institutions. Validation by Durham, and any wider partnership with the University, however broadly it is understood, is only a secondary feature of this whole programme, and it should not be allowed to dominate the picture: Durham is offering a limited service which the Church has decided that it needs, for specific purposes.

Nevertheless, I hope I have explained why I am excited by the partnership, why I think it can offer a genuine service to the Church, and be of real benefit to the University. The University can, I believe, help extend the range of critical conversations in which the Church engages as it reflects upon its practice; it can help form some of the intellectual virtues and the variety of disciplined sensitivities required in those who pursue this reflection; it can, potentially, provide one context within which the Church's contribution to the common good and to debate about the common good is explored and discussed. As it provides this help, the University will be collaborating with a great deal that is already going on in the Church – with all sorts of practices of intellectual formation and reflection that are already flourishing there – but it might nevertheless do some real good.

In return, the Church can help the University recognise its nature as a school of intellectual virtue that is engaged in building and sustaining communities of inquiry; it can help the University recognise its need for insistent and pervasive discussion of the good

that it does in the world – and, as such, it can help the University resist some of the pressures that threaten to thin its life down to technocratic rationality, and to the pursuit of knowledge and skills as individual possessions used as capital in a competitive marketplace. As it provides this help, the Church will be collaborating with a great deal that is already going on in the University – with all sorts of currents in the University’s self-understanding and growth – but it might nevertheless do some real good.

Finally, in the context of this partnership, one thing is clear. Both because it is demanded by the needs of the church and the fundamental ecclesial purpose of theological education *and* because it is demanded by the purpose of the university and the fundamental nature of academic study, the learning pursued in this partnership needs to be understood as deeply engaged with the life and practice of the church – as taking off from attentive description of that practice, and as returning to the refinement, extension and transformation of that practice, however long might be the journeys of abstraction and reflection that take place in between.